



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Thursday, 18 November 2021 at 5.00 pm.

County Borough Councillors - Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor S Bradwick (Chair)

Councillor J Barton	Councillor A Chapman
Councillor A Fox	Councillor E George
Councillor D Grehan	Councillor G Holmes
Councillor J James	Councillor W Jones
Councillor G Stacey	Councillor W Treeby
Councillor M Weaver	Councillor T Williams

Also in Attendance

Councillor A Crimmings – Cabinet Member Environment, Leisure and Heritage Services

Officers in attendance

Mr S Humphreys, Head of Legal Services
Mr D Batten, Head of Leisure
Mr S Humphreys, Head of Legal Services
Mr A Griffiths, Service Director – Highways & Engineering
Mr R Waters, Director – Frontline Services
Mr R Wistow, Ecologist
Mrs S Daniel, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillor S Pickering

1 Declaration of Interest

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, the following declarations of personal interest were made:

- County Borough Councillor J Barton - Chair of Litter Free Beddau and Tynant and agenda item 4 "attended the Local Nature Partnership representing Tynant Woods and Cwm Tips".
- County Borough Councillor S Bradwick - Member of South Wales Fire and Rescue.
- County Borough Councillor T Williams - Son works for Highways and Traffic.

2 Minutes

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 23 September 2021 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

Matters Arising:

Councillor J Barton requested further information on the Council Litter Piking strategy as she felt it was not touched upon at a satisfactory level in the previous meeting.

Cllr D Grehan referred to page 4, paragraph 4 of the previous set of minutes and raised that this para was incomplete.

3 Consultation Links

Members were informed of the Consultations that may be of interest to them.

4 Biodiversity and the Local Nature Partnership in Rhondda Cynon Taf

The Head of Leisure, Parks and Countryside presented a report to Members accompanied by a presentation that updated Members on the work of the Council and the Local Nature Partnership in relation to biodiversity in RCT and the future direction of the work. The report outlined the significant role of the Council in the management of biodiversity in its own Land.

The Ecologist gave the presentation highlighting the different projects being undertaken by Rhondda Cynon Taff Council to maintain Biodiversity under the Biodiversity Duty imposed by the Welsh Government. The Ecologist stated that utilising the Planning Function within the Council has aided in delivery of large-scale biodiversity improvements across the Borough. The projects consist of Upland Wind Farms, and Healthy Hill-Side project with partnerships from South Wales Fire and Rescue.

The Ecologist highlighted to Members the significance of Land Management in RCT and the vitality of the Council to identify ways to maintain RCT Land better for biodiversity. The Wildflower Policy introduced by the Council sets out the how, and where Wildflower management will be undertaken in RCT. The aim is to increase the amount of Wildflower Management in the Borough

As part of the Wildflower Management, funding from the Local Nature Plan has provided the Wildflower Management with two specialised Machinery which maintain Wildflowers across the Borough i.e., 70 hectares of wildflower management is currently being undertaken by the Machines and 50 hectares by Cattle Grazing.

The Ecologist outlined to Members that through the success of Wildflower management, as a Council, we are reaching the Pollinator Action implemented by the Welsh Government.

The Ecologist highlighted to Members the significance of Community engagement in relation to the delivery of biodiversity. As part of the Local Nature Partnership, Community engagement is focal, thus focus on open communication channels is encouraged between the Council and the Public; Thus, the introduction of Living Landscape Project which focuses on the management of Council owned Land for biodiversity by residential areas to

encourage direct engagement with residents.

The Chair thanked the Ecologist for a very interesting presentation and opened to Members for questions.

A Member asked what the Councils plan was to undertake work at Mynydd Y Glyn regarding the Wind Turbines in Tonyrefail, as the residents are really excited about the land and Habitats in that area. The Member also informed of his interest in being a part of the project for Tonyrefail area.

The same member queried the Councils plan on the maintenance of the Japanese Knotweed along the A4119 and Himalaya Balsam which has seen extensive widespread. The Ecologist advised that in relation to Mynydd Y Glyn he is aware of the proposals for the Wind Turbines development which will be dealt with through planning applications. The Ecologist is aware of the Peatbogs and other Habitats in the area, same processes will be implemented as all other planning applications for Wind Farms Scheme to identify the ecological impacts and implications.

In relation to the Tonyrefail SSSI, the Ecologist recognised the incredible Landscapes within that area. One of the 29 sites, Parc Erin, West of Tonyrefail Comprehensive has been focused on the Living Landscape project due to the amount of Marshy Grass and SSSI Woodland. With the focus on Parc Erin on the Living Landscape project this will provide residents of Tonyrefail with the opportunity to visit the Habitats nearer to their homes.

In relation to Japanese Knotweed, the Ecologist recognised the difficulty of managing the spread of Japanese Knotweed; However, highlighted the Councils efforts in controlling the spread through the recruitment of a new Invasive Plant Officer to manage the Japanese Knotweed across the Borough. He continued that compared to Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam can be controlled by pulling out the whole plant or spraying it in a controlled way.

The Chair requested for an Invasive Plant Officer to be invited to the next Public Service Delivery Committee and prosperity meeting to get further insight on the planned management of Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam for County Borough.

One member was very pleased with the work undertaken by the Local Nature Partnerships, however queried the support in place to support Community groups working on Private Land maintaining biodiversity such as in the Tynant Woodlands.

The Ecologist recognised the difficulties relating to the management of Private Land, especially in an area subject to future planning applications. He acknowledged the significance of the Tynant Woodlands site nature conservation. He referred the Community Engagement with the Local Nature Plan as a significant matter as it provided a collective overview of what residents of Rhonda Cynon Taf value as the important. The Ecologist made Members aware of small funding availability for biodiversity works which the Member can explore as support for the Community Group. He however stressed the limitations of the Council in dealing with Privately owned Land.

The Chair asked about Private sites in RCT to provide the Committee with an update on all projects being undertaken by Community groups.

The Ecologist informed Members that as part of the Local Nature Plan, a collation of all projects currently being undertaken in the delivery of biodiversity on private and Council owned Land will look to be logged and monitored.

A Member referred to Japanese Knotweed, he advised that this is a matter which should involve the Scrutiny Committee as a separate matter due to the problematic issues it causes to residents, i.e. reducing house prices. In agreement with the Chair the Members stressed the significance of the attendance of Invasion Plant Officer to identify ways to resolve this matter.

The Member also queried the project partnerships with Welcome to our Woods and the Skylight project of Community ownership and forestry ownership. The Ecologist confirmed partnership between Welcome to our Woods and the Skylight project as there are ties in the peat bogs restorations.

One Member asked about the Peat Land Drainage and if there were any projects in place to reclaim old Peat Bogs.

The Ecologist advised that there are 6 large scale habitat restoration in place as part of Wind Farm developments, their aim is to block drains, increase water levels and restore the Peat Bogs. He advised that there are currently two projects in progress to restore Peat Bogs, one located in the Hirwaun industrial estate with partnership with National Grid which receives green energy from the turbines. He advised the other project is through the Climate Change Steering Working Group, who are utilising a Peatland Hydrologist to identify potential Peat Bogs areas worth the Council's investment.

The Ecologist informed Members of the Cabinet that Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council possesses one of the biggest areas of Peatland within Southern Wales and the significance of restoring these sites is vital.

Due to numerous complaints being received from residents concerning Grass not being cut; the Member queried on the Council's plan to inform residents of the grass growth as part of RCT's biodiversity plan.

As efforts have been made to plant trees in areas such as Parc Celyn for biodiversity, there have been numerous vandalisms that have occurred resulting in planted trees being broken and ripped out; The Member inquired on the Council's role to stop this vandalism from occurring.

The Head of Leisure, Parks and Countryside acknowledged this; informing Members of the 700 trees planted in Parks last Winter which were also vandalised. As part of a plan to resolve the matter, the team are planting bigger trees and plan to educate residents of the significance of the trees for now and future generations to come.

To Add, The Ecologist informed Members that as part of the Living Landscape project is to provide information to residents for instance through links to the website to better inform. As part of the Let's Talk Wildflowers scheme last year, the aim was to provide residents with open communication channels to share ideas and identify the public position towards wildflowers in their areas.

The Chair was very pleased with the well informing presentation regarding biodiversity. He asked to receive further information on what plans are in place for Parks in RCT for planting wildflowers. As Councillors, the Chair advised of

the importance of being kept up to date on areas that have not had grass cut to inform residents to eliminate misunderstandings between the Council and its residents. The Chair also queried the Staff levels within the team to ensure they are better equipped for projects. Lastly, in relation to wildflowers, the Chair asked if more plants will be bought from specialist areas.

The Ecologist informed Members of the substantial number of wildflowers which exist in numerous sites across RCT. He advised as a Council, if management plans are maintained as a Borough, numerous wildflowers will emerge. He informed Members that biodiversity in RCT is not as broken as other parts of Britain.

The Chair informed Members of his encouragement to involve Schools in RCT to progress the project further due to the significance of the younger generation for the future.

The Cabinet Member was pleased with the report as it's been well received in other Committees such as the Climate Change Steering Group. She has recognised a big shift in attitude in RCT concerning the cross collaboration between Street Care, Parks and Countryside and is very pleased with Officers involvement. As a Committee she advised to keep up to date with reports and sharing these with residents. The Cabinet Members thanked Officers the reports on top on their day-to-day roles.

The Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity RESOLVED to:

- Note the progress made in RCT in recent years and the increasing importance of biodiversity conservation in the Council's work.
- Agree to receive a further report on local information in the new year and invite the invasive plants officer.

5 Highways Infrastructure

The Service Director, Highways and Engineering provided Members of the Public Service Delivery, Communities & Prosperity Scrutiny Committee with an update on the highway infrastructure within the County Borough with reference to the Highway Asset Management Plan (HAMP) and investment strategy.

A Highway Asset Management Plan (HAMP) sets out a structured approach to managing the highway asset based around the following core elements

- Hierarchy
- Inspection
- Defect
- Repair
- Programmed Repairs
- Planned Maintenance

Due to the extensive investment in the highway infrastructure, with delivery a priority, the COVID pandemic and lack of staff resources (which has been

recently resolved) a new HAMP and ASOR will now be upgraded.

The Service Director, Highways and Engineering reiterated to Members the significance of the Highways infrastructure as one of the biggest assets that RCT Councils owns, valuing at over £3.2 Billion (2021 gross replacement cost). The Highways infrastructure consists of:

- 1,295km of Carriageways
- 1,159km of Footways
- 1,567 highway structures including 196 Road Bridges
- 29,404 Streetlights
- 134 Traffic signals (signalised junction and pedestrian crossings) Plus surface water sewer systems and road gullies, miscellaneous street furniture, signs, bollards, vehicle barriers, pedestrian barriers, etc.

Considerable investments have been received within the Highways infrastructure Asset Management. Regarding the performance specifically on Roads, the Service Director, Highways and Engineering referred Members to section 4.4 of the report which highlighted the position regarding Class A, B and C Roads in RCT.

The statistics highlighted in section 4.4 compare favourably to the condition in 2010/11, due to the extensive funding received which has aided in the substantial improvements.

The Service Director, Highways and Engineering referred Members to section 5 of the report which highlighted graphs of the investment strategy. Section 5 of the report highlighted to Members the significance of continual funding to maintain Highways and park structures within RCT.

The Director of Frontline Services referred Members to section 8.4 of the report which highlighted the year-on-year investment position and condition of the Highway from 2011/12. Similarly, to the Service Director, Highways and Engineering, the Director of Frontline Services reiterated to Members the significance of funding to maintain and improve the Highways within RCT.

The Service Director, Highways and Engineering referred Members to a presentation which highlighted the projects undertaken and the significant improvements across the highways in RCT. The projects included work on Park Structures, Footways, Carriageways, Culverts, Bridges, VRS, and Retaining Walls

The Chair was pleased with the report that provided an outlook on successful projects undertaken throughout RCT and investments provided.

One Member sought clarification on the works undertaken on Bridge 240 or Llywna Farm. The Service Director, Highways and Engineering was able to confirm it was the Bridge located on Footway 240.

One Member wanted to congratulate the Service Director, Highways and Engineering for their extensive and efficient work, specifically focusing on their good use of selecting excellent contactors to undertake the projects.

One Member wanted to thank the team for their effective work on the Ynysmeurig Bridge in Abercynon.

The Chair enquired on the budget required to improve the standard of all roads in RCT.

In response the Service Director, Highways and Engineering informed Members it would take 10s of Millions of Pounds, which does not consider all structures in RCT. The Service Director of Highways and Engineering advised Members that there are over 170 highway structures which are currently on the priority list requiring work undertaken to them. 200 inspections of bridges are undertaken every year by staff to identify any repairs and upgrades needed for instance, the drainage system, traffic lights etc. Continual funding will be required to ensure all highways are up to date.

One Member congratulated the Highways team and informing Members of RCT road infrastructure as far superior compared to other Local Authorities.

The Chair welcomed and encouraged investment to the Highways services.

The Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity **RESOLVED:**

- To note the update on highways infrastructure within the County Borough reference to the asset management strategy and investment strategy.
- To note the expenditure required to maintain the highway infrastructure asset.

6 Chair's Review and Close

The Chair thanked all officers and members for attending and looked forward to seeing them all at the next meeting.

7 Urgent Business

None

**Cllr S Bradwick
Chairman**